Interview with George Kenney

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

GEORGE KENNEY

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[Note: This transcript was not edited by Mr. Kenney.]

Q: Let me start by asking for a brief description of your Foreign Service career.

KENNEY: When I started in the Foreign Service, I was recruited as an economic officer. Sometime later, in 1990 or 1991, the Department began recruiting officers without categorizing them first; i.e. “un-coned.” I went through basic training here in Washington, then was assigned to the obligatory first tour as a consular officer in Marseille, France. There I was in charge of the non-immigrant visa section of the Consulate General. We issued about 36,000 visas. I did a little work on American services and a fair amount of representational work. The post was very active in hosting visits of the Seventh Fleet. We also represented the United States at different commemorations and festivals in the towns on the coast. The Consul General had so many of these invitations that she would pass them down to the staff, and, although I was the lowest ranking officer, I still got a good share of these invitations. I would guess that at least half of my weekends were taken up by traveling to somewhere in the south of France to participate in one event or another.

My tour in Marseille lasted fifteen months. It should have been eighteen months, but it was curtailed so that I could get a better job in Washington. I had a selection of possibilities and

decided to take a job doing energy economics because I thought it would be interesting, a middle-pace kind of a job—I really didn't want to go into the fast lane in my first tour in Washington, but I also didn't want a back-water. I talked to the people for whom I would work, and was given the task of worrying about oil and energy security. I found the work quite interesting. The people in the office were quite friendly, and I enjoyed my assignment.

A couple of months after my arrival in Washington—in early 1990—it looked like things were picking up in the Middle East and, before we knew it, we were in the midst of a Gulf War. At that point, our office went into the proverbial “fast forward” with 12- hour days, working on weekends. The Deputy Assistant Secretary liked my work; I was the only economist in the office who had a degree in economics (I graduated from the University of Chicago). So I could hold my own with a lot of economists who were specialists from other agencies such as the Department of Energy, DOD and CIA. So I would accompany the Deputy Assistant Secretary on trips to Paris and would sit in meetings representing our office. It was very exciting, and I enjoyed the work tremendously. We dealt with a wide range of issues. We not only worried about such matters as the use of the Strategic Petroleum Reserve and other stockpiles in case of need, but I also got involved in the late stages of the National Security Strategy and became one of the contact points between the State and Energy Departments. We argued back and forth about which policies we should advocate and which would not work. I got involved in matters that the State Department did not normally get involved in. I knew some economists in the Council of Economic Advisers in the White House. I helped one to draft a chapter on oil security which eventually became part of the President's 1990 economic report. So it was a good introduction to Washington.

Q: How did you go from the Bureau for Economic Affairs to your next assignment?

KENNEY: In the State Department, there is one basic rule: no one is going to take care of you; you have to take care of yourself. It was something that my father told me before

I joined the Service. He had been in the Service for 35 years. I took that advice to heart. In making assignments in the Foreign Service, there is a formal process and there is an informal one. The formal process requires the system to produce a list of potential openings from which an officer selects those that look interesting to him or her. Then someone in the personnel system tries to match a vacancy with an interested officer. But the informal system is more important than that. You find out who has the jobs to dispense, who makes the decisions and you try to meet them and talk to them or you get their friends to make recommendations so that the assignments are wired from the inside.

I was looking around the world, and I wanted a good job that would give me opportunities to broaden out. I found a vacant position two grades higher than my own grade in Kinshasa, Zaire, as a finance and development officer. Kinshasa is designated as a “hardship” post. No one at the right level had bid for that vacancy; there were some who were one grade below who had put their names in. But we were able to argue that I was more qualified than any of the other candidates and, therefore, I won that assignment, even though it was a two level “stretch.” I was very happy to go to that assignment. I was there for a couple of months when the Zaire military mutinied and the Western countries closed or severely reduced their diplomatic presence. So I didn't even have time to unpack my household shipment. I stayed in a variety of hotel rooms; I just had gotten acclimated to my office space. I had just started making contacts and drafting reports. I predicted the mutiny because my tracking of the economy suggested that the Zairian middle class was experiencing a worse situation than it had met before, or at least since the last military coup.

So I returned to Washington. Because of the particularity of the personnel system, I “belonged” to the Bureau for African Affairs. It didn't want to release me because it was afraid that, by doing so it would lose the position. It didn't mind letting me go, but it didn't want to lose the position because it would take them years to get it back. The system didn't want to make an exception in my case because they were afraid that they would be inundated by requests from people who wanted to transfer to other positions. So I and fifty

or sixty other people were in virtual limbo. I made a deal with the Bureau which permitted me to be “loaned” out to the Bureau of Oceans, Environment and Science. I knew some people in an office in that Bureau who were working on the economics of global climate change in preparation for the Rio summit. They were willing to give me an office and used me as sort of a consultant. I wrote some reports for them. But it was not a key position. I was not a desk officer; I was not involved in the normal work of the Department. So I had at least 50% of my time free, which I used to try to find another job in the Department. I tried to find a Bureau that had more leverage than the Bureau of African Affairs which could get me freed from my situation. After roaming the halls for several months—from late September to early January, 1992—I found a job in the Bureau for European Affairs. A friend of mine was the lone desk officer for Yugoslavia. He was completely burned out from fifteen-hour workdays, every day. I had known this fellow from our childhood because he had grown up in a Foreign Service family, as I had. He was several years older and had, on occasion, been my babysitter. He wanted to establish a second position to help him. The Bureau agreed and it was established and I was assigned to it.

Formally, I went to work on the Yugoslavia desk on February 1, 1992, although I had actually started in mid-January. From then until I resigned on August 25, 1992, I worked on Yugoslav issues.

Q: So you became the assistant country desk officer? When in your view did American policy toward Bosnia begin to fall apart?

KENNEY: I guess I was called deputy officer-in-charge. I think we failed to develop a policy toward the Balkans from the start of the crisis. If you go back to '90 or '91, it was fairly obvious that Milosevic intended to destroy the Yugoslav federal system in order to create a greater Serbia. But the world was sort of tired, after going through the Gulf War. The bureaucracy in State did not want to encourage the dissolution of any Communist or ex-Communist country, partly in fear that that might encourage the Soviet Union to fall apart. At a higher level, to the extent that either Bush or Baker focused on the area, the

intelligence was that Yugoslavia would fall apart fairly violently. So they thought that, if the U.S. committed itself to do something about that potential breakup, we might become involved in a war and might have to commit forces—a risk they didn't want to run. So they supported a “hands-off” policy, whatever else we might say.

We sent a lot of signals to the Serbs that we would not really get involved. We might act as neutral mediators, but that didn't bother Milosevic and the Serbs at all. Because there wasn't any high level interest in looking at the crisis, we never really defined the problem very well. By the time the conflict began to get out of hand, Eagleburger and Baker were saying that it was a civil war or an ethnic conflict. They were trying to rationalize the U.S. not getting involved. It seems to me that the right way of looking at this is to understand that Milosevic was able to take over a crumbling Communist system, substitute his own political machinery and start to manipulate people, particularly through the mass media—the electronic media. Most people in Serbia are illiterate; probably less than five percent have a college education. They depend on radio and TV. There were a couple of independent radio and TV stations in Belgrade, but for the most part the Serbian masses depended on state-controlled media. From 1986 through 1991, Milosevic was telling people that they had a lot of grievances that needed to be redressed. If they weren't persuaded by what they heard on TV, Milosevic was also getting control of the police, the secret police and the army, as well as key unions and jobs. So people couldn't very easily resist all this. To make it even easier, the Croatian government, under Tudjman, was moving in a somewhat similar direction, although not as malevolently. Tudjman was kind of threatening the Serbs in Croatia. The Croats violated Serbian human and civil rights and, in some cases, killed people and, in some cases, stole property and put people in jail. The Serbs in Croatia had cause for alarm.

In any case, the Serbs started the conflict. No one in the outside world wanted to become involved. We went from bad to worse. By the time I arrived on the desk in February 1992, I immediately noticed that the CIA was predicting that Bosnia was very likely to blow up. As I considered the intelligence reports and analysis and talked to people to learn as much as

I could, it seemed to me that the CIA estimate was probably correct. So I recommended that at a minimum, the State Department develop a contingency plan for dealing with the breakup of Bosnia, so that, if it started to happen, we would not be caught unprepared. No one really wanted to listen to that kind of recommendation. We were so caught up in rationalizing non-involvement and in reliance on mechanisms, such as the CSCE or the EC to produce some sort of settlement that we didn't want to contemplate how much worse the war could get.

Q: If the desk was urging some action, who was resisting? The Assistant Secretary? The Deputy Secretary? The Secretary?

KENNEY: There are two levels to this. In early January, Eagleburger returned to the Department from a White House meeting to tell senior officers—I wasn't there, but I was briefed—that, whatever we do, we could not get substantively involved in the Yugoslav crisis. We could proceed with as many diplomatic meetings as we wanted, but we could not commit the U.S. to do anything. We were permitted to talk to the EC and the Europeans, but that was the limit. Eagleburger was very consistent in that. He absolutely did not want us to get close to some kind of substantive involvement. The bureaucracy took those marching orders very seriously. Senior officers tried to avoid absolutely anything that might bring us closer to involvement. We could not talk about genocide or atrocities because that might arouse public opinion and force the administration to do something. We could not talk about starvation in Sarajevo for the same reasons.

Months before we started an airlift to Sarajevo, I had suggested that we do so because I knew that starvation there would start in the foreseeable future. The argument against that was that we might find ourselves in another Vietnam, and we couldn't risk that. When reports of atrocities and concentration camps began to leak out, I suggested that we should investigate by sending survey teams out to get the facts. We could have debriefed refugees. We could have built up a data base for possible later prosecution of the perpetrators. We didn't want to do that either. We have avoided dealing with the

problem in every way; we did not want to take any risk of arousing public opinion. There was great concern that we might be forced to change the policy.

I think that, at the top level, there was a clear desire not to do anything. The bureaucracy, at the senior levels, picked that up and tried to enforce that policy. The bureaucracy at the mid-level really resisted. I knew virtually nothing about the Balkans before I started to work on these issues. I soon learned from my colleagues - in INR, in the Bureau, in the field, in CIA - what was going on in Bosnia. I was a blank slate, but it became obvious to me very quickly from what I heard from all sources that our policy was not working. That view was a majority view, by far, among the working-level experts. So there was a disconnect between the working level, who could see what we were doing was a terrible mistake, and the senior level, who thought they had some better political sense. Interestingly enough, later on, by July and August, as we entered the Presidential campaign, Bush and Baker seemed to become interested in testing the waters a little more. Baker, on a couple of occasions during appearances before Congress made strong statements to the effect that we would do whatever it would take to deliver humanitarian aid. I remember that I tried to tape those words so that they could be used for press guidance. But the Office Director insisted that we would have “to walk back” from those statements. After the Secretary made some statements, the principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for EUR called in the NATO Ambassadors to brief them on what the Secretary had said because they were all very interested. The briefing in fact provided no indication that we had changed our policy, even a little. I think that the senior bureaucrats failed to realize that at the senior political level there may have been disagreement or confusion about what our policy should be. So the senior bureaucrats stuck to their original marching orders which, as I said before, were essentially “do nothing” and say as little as possible. We still see that today. We are trying to get a U.N. war crimes tribunal prosecutor. The British absolutely do not want to have a prosecutor who will bring indictments because they think, correctly, that such indictments would upset the peace process. Others, like myself, believe that indictments would be a good thing to punish the perpetrators some day or at least to hold potential retribution over

some people's heads. The U.S. is caving in to the British; we are not willing to challenge them in the Security Council. So we are not really pushing for the selection of a strong prosecutor, but are looking only at compromise candidates who are certainly not going to seek indictments. It is a farce almost to a point where someone should nominate Kurt Waldheim for the job.

Q: Was that disconnect between the mid-level staff and the senior leadership a function of age or outlook or career concerns?

KENNEY: I wouldn't say that age was a factor because there were a couple of senior officers who were very much opposed to our policy, or lack of policy, who continued to work surreptitiously against it. It was an extraordinary situation. Normally the “leaks” in the State Department come from the Seventh Floor's political appointees. Now you find people at the Office Director's level throughout the Department, who have knowledge of what is going on, who are talking relatively openly to the press. It is quite remarkable. People, who I would never dream would talk to a reporter, are now willing to take calls from them or talk to them face-to-face. People who oppose the Administration cover a broad range of ages.

There may be a division between people in the 20-40 age group and those in the 50-60 group, but the division is sharper between rank levels—the mid-level vs. the senior level, i.e., the Assistant Secretary, the Under Secretary, the Deputy Secretary. When I was in the Department, our Bosnian policy was made by a very small number of people: Eagleburger, Kantor (Under Secretary for Political Affairs) periodically, Tom Niles, Assistant Secretary for European Affairs—an old Yugoslav hand—, his principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Ralph Johnson, our Office Director, Mike Habib. Those five guys were making the policy. They didn't listen to the desk officer, they didn't listen to INR, they didn't really listen to CIA. The “do nothing” policy was approved by the top level of the Administration.

Q: What was the position of our missions in the country? Did they just toe the line?

KENNEY: The Embassy in Belgrade was entirely too cozy with the Serbian government. Ambassador Warren Zimmermann talked to Milosevic and believed he could deal with him. It wasn't until he was recalled in July, 1992 that Zimmermann had a change of heart and began to doubt that Milosevic could be dealt with and that perhaps force might be necessary. He would send cables which said that, on the one hand, Milosevic was a bastard and vicious, but, on the other, he is sort of reasonable and that there were ways to talk to him. After the Ambassador's recall, we left a Charge in Belgrade who conducted “business as usual,” when we should not have done so. There is an irony right now because, although we have an Embassy in Belgrade, we do not recognize the present Serbian regime and do not conduct diplomatic relations with it. We do not recognize the so-called Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. We maintain that Yugoslavia is dissolved; we recognize three of its former republics, but the “Federal republic” exists in a gray area. Why do we have an Embassy then? The Department wants to maintain an Embassy to have a listening post and an observer in Belgrade and a facility which permits some communication to the Serbian leadership. We have exchanged diplomatic notes to provide mutual protection for the diplomats, but if we are going to be serious about punishing Serbia, we should start by taking some action, such as closing our Embassy. If we ever do undertake any military operations, we should close the Embassy to prevent our staff from becoming hostage. It seems to me, as long as we have an Embassy in Belgrade, the Serbs must know that a lot of our threats of military action are hollow.

The Embassy was divided roughly the same way the Department was. The top level, more or less, was sympathetic with our policy. The working level, with whom I would talk daily, thought that our policy was completely screwed up. They were looking for ways to change it. I used to have long conversations every morning with the political section staff. We would explicitly condemn our latest policy pronouncement or action. The Department's Yugoslav desk and the Embassy's Political Section were very much of the same mind. We conversed on an open telephone line, and didn't really care whether the Serbs overheard us. I would talk to my contacts in the Political Section who would give me the latest

update on the situation in Belgrade. They reflected, at least in the “spin” they put on the events, the concerns that we shared. The broader “think-pieces,” usually written by the ambassador or the DCM, would be much more in tune with hopes of the senior officials in the Department and would emphasize the “talk to the Serbs” attitude.

At several points, our Office was trying to cut some of the other Department off from the communications from Belgrade. The Office Director and the DCM from July through August wanted to characterize the Bosnian war as the U.N. was doing. Rather than reporting a variety of differing interpretations of events on the ground, the Office and the embassy increased their communications through the Official-Informal channel which is not circulated in the Department. Only one copy of these messages were made for filing purposes. Finally, the Office of the EUR Assistant Secretary decided to crack down on this process. It dictated that all cable exchanges with the Embassy should be in regular channels. So the Office and the Embassy began to use the classified FAX channel to agree on a particular line to be taken; after reaching such agreement, the message would be turned into an official cable. It was something!

There is one story that sums up the experience. In early July, we were having a flap about concentration camps. One reporter had just written a book “Witness to Genocide” that included a lot of material on concentration camps. He had been very brave. He had traveled through Bosnia visiting a lot of these camps. I had heard about some of his stories because he had told the Consul General in Zagreb that he was working on this book, and wanted the C.G.'s views and insights. The C.G. sent in a reporting cable, warning us that these stories and more would be made public soon. I thought that was an important break because I knew that once these stories of atrocities hit the press, we would be forced to respond. But I couldn't get anyone above me to focus on the issue. The problem was ignored until the stories broke. Then the Department reacted by saying it knew nothing of these matters. It would not acknowledge that there was a problem. The situation became very confused. At one point, the Department's spokesman Boucher had to admit that we knew about the concentration camps, then he retracted that admission. A day later, Tom

Niles was testifying in Congress. Congressman Tom Lantos from California asked him what he knew about the camps. Niles had received two bits of advice on how to respond to that question: a) “stonewall”—i.e., deny any knowledge (this advice was given by the Office Director) and b) admit that we had a terrible problem and were trying to find out as much as we could on an urgent basis (my advice). Niles “stonewalled.” He was really dressed down by the Committee. When he came back from the Hill, the Department went through another two days of crisis. Finally, Eagleburger issued a formal statement which said that we didn't have much information, but were trying to collect as much as we could, as quickly as we could. In the midst of all of this, I had to compile a short narrative for the President's evening reading book, which includes 10-15 different items. This report is intended to supplement the President's daily intelligence briefing. My paragraph was about concentration camps. I said that we knew that Serbs ran some camps; that we knew that the Serbs were responsible for most of the abuses, but, at the same time, I said that the Croats and the Muslims also ran camps, although the abuses in these facilities were not as serious. I gave some rough estimates of the number of camps. By the time I had finished circulating the draft for clearance, Eagleburger's office changed it to read that all factions ran camps and that all factions perpetrated abuses. I thought that it was just too much for a factual statement to be censored so that the President would not learn the truth. The bureaucracy had taken its original instructions and had taken them to extremes. We were, in fact, saying that, since our policy was not to do anything, the President should not be roused by fact; he might take some action. The Department would do what it was supposed to by keeping the U.S. out of this.

Q: Was your career ever explicitly threatened and you were told to toe the party line, or was it all implied? How was pressure applied to you?

KENNEY: It was all implied. You get in part to be an office director or a deputy assistant secretary by being sensitive to subtle signals. It is barely a twitch of an eye-brow that sends these people into shock. I was never told to get in line or I wouldn't be given another good assignment. Never. Ironically, the people who have worked the hardest to uphold

the administration's position have not prospered: Ralph Johnson got an OK job, not great; Tom Niles got an OK job, but also not great. They were not rewarded for their obedience. The only guy in the whole Department who really agreed with the administration's position was my Office Director, with whom I disagreed strongly, who got an excellent assignment as Political Counselor in London.

Q: There was obviously a strong disagreement between those who felt that the Bosnian conflict was hundreds of years old and those who thought that, as it was primarily a Serb aggression, it was a new phenomenon.

KENNEY: Right. The experience taught me that individuals really matter. Milosevic really mattered; he made all the difference in the world. If Milosevic hadn't lived, the Serbs would not have created him. Milosevic himself, if he had a different personality, could have turned Yugoslavia in an entirely different direction. He could have used his great bureaucratic power to bring Yugoslavia into Europe, to increase economic prosperity. But he is really a diabolical man. Hitler was like that, also Stalin, Lenin. There are people, including evil ones, who can change history. Milosevic was one of them. Very early in his regime, we could have told him that we didn't back him trying to build a “Greater Serbia.” We should have told him that we were prepared to apply economic sanctions or we were prepared to punish him in a variety of ways. We might even have threatened to arm his opponents. Milosevic didn't get firm hold of the Army until mid-1991, just before the start of the fighting. He has purged the military since that time on a number of occasions, including a recent major discharge of a number of generals. Soon he will have to get rid of some colonels. The Yugoslav Army was a large, professional organization—the fifth largest in Europe. A lot of its officers were American-trained. They were reluctant to fight their own people. It was an unprofessional thing to do. It was difficult for Milosevic to get control of the military. He had to fool them, to a certain extent, about his objectives. Now he had built up a domestic police force in Serbia which is as strong, if not stronger, than the Army.

There were a lot of ways we could have exercised leverage on him, but we didn't. By the time we got around to invoking sanctions in mid-92, it was too late.

Q: Was there any real organized opposition in State?

KENNEY: Not really. That is something I would do differently if I had to do it over again. After I left, individuals started to send “Dissent” memoranda. There were twelve who sent a letter to Christopher; there were another half dozen “Dissent” memoranda. Although it may not have had a huge impact, it was a way for individuals to go on record and to show that dissent existed in the ranks. In my work, I dealt every day with the press spokesperson for EUR who was married to the Executive Secretary of the Department. “Dissent” memoranda go to the Executive Secretary. The spokesperson was telling her husband what I thought of the policy; he thought that my message was getting through regardless whether I was putting it on paper or not. The only purpose of writing a “Dissent” memorandum would have been to leave a paper trail and, in retrospect, I think I should have done so. But I didn't have the experience to know that at the time. I also think I should have asked for meetings with some senior officials, such as Kantor. I would have told him that we were making some very dangerous mistakes and that our policies should be reconsidered. But I was too inexperienced to know to do that.

Q: If asked, how would you advise someone who might be considering entering the Foreign Service?

KENNEY: It depends. I certainly think the Foreign Service is a worthwhile experience. I would not necessarily view it as a permanent career. I viewed it for myself as a career; I intended to stay in the Service as long as I advanced in it, which I had done quite rapidly, compared with my peers. But I might have left under different circumstances simply because there may have been a better job offer elsewhere. The Foreign Service is a very good experience. You learn how the government works, how foreign policy is made. There is almost no other way to learn those things except to personally participate. So I would

encourage people to join the Foreign Service, but I would add that they should not expect necessarily to stay in the Foreign Service for a whole working life.

Q: Finally, is there anything for the record that you might wish to add?

KENNEY: It is difficult to resign over an issue of principle. It is difficult to anticipate what that resignation may mean. When I resigned, I didn't have a guide book to tell me what to do or how to effect our policy. I resigned because I thought that I could have more influence on the policy on the outside than from the inside. In fact, I was much more successful in making my case publicly than I ever dreamed would be possible. In part, that is because I think I have a knack of dealing with the press. I liked it. I loved teaching and good press relations have some of that in it. It is important that people viewed a resignation over principle as a real check on the system. We don't have such a tradition in this country, as they do in Europe. There, people resign from a government and later rejoin it. Here, if one resigns, it is very rare that he or she will join the government again, although there are exceptions such as Tony Lake who resigned over the bombing of Cambodia, who returned to serve in the Carter administration and now as National Security Advisor under Clinton. I would like to see more of that in the United States. I hope that I can make somewhat of a success of what I do to prove that it is possible to resign and still have a life, so that resignations do not impose exorbitant costs.

End of interview